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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BELGRADE 000193

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: KOSOVO- SERBS GO PUBLIC WITH PRIVATE MESSAGES

REF: 05 BELGRADE 2215

Classified By: Ambassador Michael C. Polt, (Reasons 1.4 B&D)

SUMMARY

1.(C) A media uproar over an announcement by Kosovo Serbs that visiting British Political Director John Sawers told them the Contact Group supported Kosovo independence, prompted a sharp reaction from Belgrade officials, and overshadowed the constructive private messages delivered on February 4 by U.S. Status Envoy, Frank Wisner. Though Sawers tried to downplay the independence question in public statements made in Belgrade on February 7, the Kostunica and Tadic cabinets, forced into a defense posture, portrayed the British position as being different from the international consensus (read: Russia's position). The freshness of the private message on independence and the public debate sparked by disclosure of the British position, make a focus on delivering tangible progress on decentralization from the upcoming Vienna meetings a way to keep Belgrade engaged. END SUMMARY.

WISNER MESSAGE BURIED, NOT LOST

2.(U) In the immediate aftermath of Ambassador Wisner's Feb. 4 visit, by design, there was little substantive media coverage, other than Wisner's comment that the U.S. wants the negotiations to end on by the end of 2006. The Feb. 7 issue of the generally pro-government daily, Politika, offered the first view of the Serbian response to the visit with the headline: "Milosevic lost Kosovo-- Loss of the province is not a punishment for the current leaders of Serbia." The accompanying article claimed that, in his Feb 4 meeting with PM Kostunica, "Amb. Wisner did not explicitly say that the American plan envisages an independent Kosovo by the end of this year, but he clearly stated he believes that a concept of conditional independence is nonsense." The story went on to say that PM Kostunica strongly agrees with Wisner's rejection of "conditional independence," since "you are either independent or you are not."

3.(U) The article further suggests that the U.S. "is leaning towards full independence", since Wisner allegedly stressed with Kostunica that "Kosovo was lost by Milosevic and the Radicals." The story challenges this assertion by quoting Tadic advisor Kojen as saying it would be "completely illogical" to hold a negotiation on Kosovo's future status, if Milosevic had lost Kosovo. "If such a thing were the case," Kojen asserts, "KFOR and UNMIK should just withdraw and leave all the power to the Albanians who have 'earned it' for all their suffering."

4.(C) A close advisor to President Tadic told the DCM on Feb. 8 that the President was "thankful" for Wisner's forthright message on status. Knowing the USG view up front would make it easier for Serbia to approach the talks, he said.

MEDIA UPROAR OVER U.K. MEETING WITH K-SERBS

5.(C) Discussion of Wisner's message was eclipsed on February 7, after some Kosovo Serbs told Belgrade media following a meeting with British Foreign Office Political Director John Sawers, that Sawers had told them the Contact Group had decided to grant independence to Kosovo. One of the Kosovo Serbs present at the February 6 meeting told us that they were all completely surprised when, within the first few minutes of the meeting, Sawers told them explicitly that the outcome of status discussions would be independence. Goran Bogdanovic (DS), who is a member of the Belgrade negotiating team for Kosovo status, recounted the meeting for the press, saying Sawers had urged Kosovo Serbs to accept that "Kosovo is your state as well, which will be multi-ethnic, but will be eventually independent." Kosovo Serbs Rada Trajkovic and Momcilo Trajkovic gave similar statements to Belgrade media, sparking widespread public speculation about the CG position on the outcome of status talks. Radical party deputy leader, Tomislav Nikolic, and Kosovo Coordination Center (CCK) president Sanda Raskovic-Ivic have called into question Serb participation in upcoming direct talks in Vienna.

6.(C) The Kostunica and Tadic cabinets have continued to reassure us they will participate in the Vienna talks, and

have relied on well known Belgrade talking points in their public response-- that the status outcome must come from the U.N. Security Council; that international law guarantees Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo, and that the British position on Kosovo independence is not in line with Contact Group consensus. Several of our interlocutors have pointed to Russia's vocal stance and the lack of a CG consensus.

SAWERS: OPTIONS ARE LIMITED

7.(U) Sawers tried to quell the uproar over the K-Serb announcement with a high profile, in-depth interview on B-92 TV after his Feb. 7 meeting with PM Kostunica and Tadic advisors. Sawers said he had not told the Kosovo Serb leaders the CG had decided on independence. Instead, he clarified that the CG had agreed the solution for Kosovo's status should be acceptable to the majority of the province's citizens. "It is clear that independence is an option, for some the only one," he told B-92 television, "but it is not the only topic of the talks. The talks will discuss many issues and the details will be essential as to how common Kosovo Albanians, Kosovo Serbs, and member of other minorities in Kosovo can live freely on that territory." He added, "there is a large consensus in the Contact Group on what is important, what the options are, and which path should be taken," and that the options being considered as possible outcomes were "very limited."

BELGRADE: BRITS PLAYING GAME, UNSC WILL DECIDE

8.(U) After meeting with Sawers, PM Kostunica issued a written statement which emphasized, "the UN Security Council alone has the mandate to change principles adopted for talks on the future status of Kosovo." The statement added that a "one-sided and exclusive" approach to the status talks, before they have begun, is "totally unacceptable," and is a direct contradiction to the CG public statement issued on January 31. According to the GOS statement, the PM told Sawers, "Any attempt to impose a solution on a democratic state represents not only inappropriate pressure, but a violation of the founding principles of international law and the international system."

9.(U) Advisors to the PM and President made themselves available to the media after the meeting with Sawers, characterizing the British position as at odds with the consensus CG view. Slobodan Samardzic told RTS television that the U.K. "is playing a pressure game" for Kosovo independence, and that this is "not the first time" the British have delivered such a message. Though Sawers had toned down the message he had delivered in Pristina, according to Samardzic, the British diplomat had "de facto" called for an independent Kosovo in his meeting with Kostunica. Tadic advisor, Leon Kojen, appearing on B-92 television, said there is disagreement in the Contact Group about what should be the final outcome of status talks. Kojen said the positions range between the British position of independence and the Russian position that the outcome must be acceptable to both sides. Kojen added that the U.S. position offered by Ambassador Wisner was closer to the U.K. position.

10.(U) Russian Ambassador to SaM, Aleksandr Alekseyev, also gave an interview to B-92 television, saying, "If the decision on Kosovo's future status were already known, there would be no point in launching status talks." Alekseyev stressed that Russia supported a solution that is acceptable to both Belgrade and Pristina. At the same time, Alekseyev rejected the idea that Russia disagreed with its Contact Group partners and cautioned that "Serbia should not believe Russia views Kosovo as an internal problem," but only that the resolution of the problem "should take into account, "universal, international principles."

EU'S LEHNE SOFTENS MESSAGE

11.(C) The EU envoy to the Ahtisaari team, Stefan Lehne, in Belgrade on February 8-9, told the Ambassador that he had had a "positive meeting" with Kostunica, where he delivered the private messages from an EU point of view. Lehne said he sought to deliver the "tough message" to Kostunica more softly, in terms of the EU's legitimate interest in shaping a realistic post-settlement transition and Serbia's European prospects.

COMMENT

12.(C) The reaction to Sawers' visit was predictable. There has been for some time a deep-seated suspicion in the Prime Minister's office that London has actively lobbied inside the Contact Group for an early decision on independence (RefTel). Belgrade expected the worst out of Sawers' visit and may have sought to exploit it: the K-Serb

public outcry after their meetings with Sawers embarrassed the British and presented the "tough" message not as an emerging Contact Group consensus but as another example of British eagerness to advance their own national position in support of an independent Kosovo.

13.(C) It will take time for Belgrade to accommodate their public position to the reality outlined by Ambassador Wisner (and Sawers). They are still assessing how to proceed and what changes, if any, they should make in their public posture and negotiating strategy. We should consider the whole cycle of images and reactions of the last few days as trial balloons-- both the spin on Sawers visit as well as the more encouraging argument in Politika that Milosevic lost Kosovo some time ago. Belgrade will be watching carefully to see if the IC is committed to something real on decentralization or whether the "tough message" is an announcement that the negotiations are over. 14.(C) As they make that determination and get accustomed to a dose of reality, we should strive to make the first round in Vienna a substantive step forward on decentralization, in order to provide Belgrade a strong rationale for staying at the table. Early progress will demonstrate to Belgrade that there is something in this for them. It will also help the more constructive leaders-- Tadic and Draskovic-- sell whatever package comes out of the status settlement. END COMMENT.

15.(U) Embassy Belgrade clears this cable in its entirety for release to U.N. envoy Marti Ahtisaari.
POLT